



Interview with Nikhil Chopra

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CHAMPS NOT CHUMPS

Interview with Nikhil Chopra



NIKHIL CHOPRA
[PERFORMANCE & INSTALLATION ARTIST]

"I THINK DRAWING OR MAKING MAPS OR TAKING PHOTOGRAPHS OR MAKING IMAGES OF SOMETHING, I THINK THERE'S AN ACT OF CLAIMING OWNERSHIP OVER IT. MY TAKE ON IT IS TO RECLAIM A CERTAIN KIND OF HISTORY, TO RETURN, IN FACT, THIS ORIENTALIST DISCUSSION ABOUT THE WESTERN TRAVELLER COMING TO THE EAST AND MAKING DOCUMENTS AND TAKING THEM BACK HOME."

On a sunny November day, my cousin Nate and I emerge from a subway station in New York's Lower East Side. We walk the few blocks to the New Museum, an uneven stack of silver-white, aluminum boxes that veers six floors into the air. Above the entrance an arc of rainbow letters declares: "Hell, Yes!"

Past the front doors and across the lobby, separated by a glass partition from the patrons of the museum cafe, Nikhil Chopra is performing *Yog Raj Chitrakar: Memory Drawing IX*. Wrapped in a coarse gray blanket, he is pacing the length of the space in slow, purposeful steps.

He has been living here for the past few days in a space that suggests an austere nineteenth century bedchamber: a table is set out with fruits, cheeses, and a roast fowl; a stool sits in front of a wash basin appointed with items appropriate to a gentleman's toilet; clothes are neatly folded and laid out in sets or else are still wrapped in brown paper bundles tied with string. The low mattress that has served as the artist's bed for the past few days has been fastidiously made up with tight-fitting sheets and blankets.

Madhavi, Nikhil's wife and a friend of mine from graduate school, greets me with a generous hug. During the six hours I spend observing the performance, Madhavi tends to Om, their fourteen-month-old son, and catches up with friends and family, some of whom haven't seen the couple since they moved back to India.

Nikhil mounts a ladder and adjusts the sheets of canvas that hang behind him. These are floor-to-ceiling drawings of New York that the artist made earlier in the week, during a field trip to Ellis Island. It was a shame he didn't have a chance to complete them, someone tells me. There had been some kind of emergency and the fire department had to evacuate the island.

By now, some people have walked through an open doorway in the glass wall and are observing Nikhil close-up. He doesn't speak to or acknowledge them. Instead, Madhavi acts as a kind of ambassador for the artist and his work, responding to questions posed by the critical, the captivated, or the simply perplexed.

I don't actually speak to Nikhil until the following day. Earlier, as the character Yog Raj Chitrakar,

his demeanor had suggested weariness and inconsolable melancholy. But the morning of the interview, as we drink coffee and smoke cigarettes in front of the museum, he is warm and garrulous. He remarks that he is a little self-conscious walking around without any eyebrows-- he shaved them off at some point during the performance.

He has maybe an hour to talk before he needs to consult with the museum staff about the installation. "I don't know what to do about the food," he tells me, "I'm sure some of it has maggots by now."

We find a table inside. The museum is preparing to open, so phones ring, elevators ding, and a machine in the cafe gurgles industriously during the length of our talk. We do our best to tune out the distractions, and I ask Nikhil about *Yog Raj Chitrakar: Memory Drawing IX*.

--Tom Dodson

Part I

Tom Dodson: So we're in the New Museum in New York, where you've just completed a five day performance that combines elements of live art, landscape drawing, portraiture, and installation art. It's a long piece with lots of different dimensions, but how would you describe it to someone who hasn't read about or encountered it?

Nikhil Chopra: Well, I think that your introduction to the piece gives us a certain set of clues to enter the work. I think there are many places from where I like to enter the work, but one of the things that perhaps I would like to add to that is my interest in autobiography. I do think of this as in a way an extension of my story.

If I were to think back on why I like to make pictures for example, or why I am an artist, for example, I go back to perhaps my childhood. Maybe it was looking at paintings that my grandfather made of Kashmir when I was five and six years old that became very precious and very important for me to kind of pickup from that. It became very important for me I think when I left from America and went back to India and I started to think about my own personal history and my own reasons for making choices that I have made with my life. I think that my grandfather becomes a very interesting clue.

Thus, this character. If I were to take Yog Raj Chitrakar, for example, the name of this character, he is very directly from the name of my grandfather, Yog Raj Chopra. Chitrakar in this case literally translates to "picture-maker." So, I think, for me, it's a combination of not just autobiography, but also fantasy.

I think as soon as the performance starts it becomes very little about my grandfather. It becomes a lot about me, my aspirations, what I want to do with it, the challenges and the constraints I put on myself. Those challenges can be about the medium, lets say charcoal and canvas; the constraints can be the time-span that I give myself. The constraints can be what the costume brings about as well.

So, there is this need with the work to dig as well, to excavate, to make a legacy or a history out of perhaps no history at all, to make a tradition perhaps out of no tradition at all. My father is an actor, for example, he loved the stage, so I think if I were to [. . .] sum up perhaps in a very personal way about what this work is, I think it's a combination of perhaps my father and my grandfather, you know, coming together in me.

And that's a very simple, I think, introduction, perhaps to what this work could mean other than

issues of perhaps landscape painting, live performance and theater, and photography, sculpture, tableau vivant. So there are various points of entry.

TD: Yeah, and this Chitrakar, this picture-maker character, is also a traveller and he goes to different cities and you've done versions of the performance [. . .] in Mumbai, in Brussels, in London, and now in New York. How have you responded to these different contexts? How has the work changed?

NC: The work directly responds to site [. . .] especially because it's live [. . .] A lot of it is unrehearsed. There are a lot of places within the work which are unplanned. I give myself--I have a blueprint, for example, that I go with from place to place.

I've made him a traveler simply because I'm traveling with it and because I'm trying to make very [. . .] close relationships between my reality and this fictional character and this world of fantasy, making him into a traveller becomes a very easy--not an easy--but it [. . .] brings it much closer to my reality. And it makes for it to be much more spontaneous and it makes [. . .] the improvisational aspect of this fresher for me.

So a lot of the time the work becomes about reacting to the place that I am in. I pretend, for example, as if I were a turn of the century, or perhaps [. . .] eighteenth or nineteenth century draftsman, for example--very romantic, colonial, perhaps--draftsman that would go perhaps from place to place making chronicles of the world, bringing back [. . .] home to let's say the king or the queen, or the patron to say: "Hey, look. Look what we have. Look at the extant of our empires."

TD: I'm very interested in that, I mean, in preparing for this interview I was reading a little bit about the tradition[s] of photography and landscape drawing in India. You know, and in the eighteenth century British draughtsman travelled all over India, looking for picturesque scenery, and monuments, and architectural sites, and these and other practices of representations pretty clearly--by Western artists and writers--contributed to a body of knowledge that provided both ideological and practical support for the British colonial project--

NC: Absolutely.

TD: So [. . .] I think it's interesting to see your Chitrakar going to European and American cities and making landscape drawings and I wondered if you could say a little about the relationship your work might have to these kind of orientalist representations of India and its landscape.

NC: Yes. I think drawing or making maps or taking photographs or making images of something, I think there's an act of claiming ownership over it. My take on it is to reclaim a certain kind of history, to return, in fact, this orientalist discussion about the Western traveller coming to the East and making documents and taking them back home. I want to be the oriental, perhaps, that comes to the West and makes drawings--

[Laughter]

NC: And makes chronicles and perhaps goes back home to India with the memory of that or with photographs of that or documentation of that [. . .] and also the part that I play is certainly not off the oriental, the obviously oriental--I play this very Eurocentric gentleman, very Victorian, very prudish, very conservative almost, very tight-lipped, silent observer, ghost-like, solitary--even though I am in crowded cities and people are interacting with me, trying to interact with me. I see it as a kind of taking back of a certain history.

And also I think within that is where my critique of let's say even perhaps "representation" may

lie, even though so much of it becomes about representation. I think that I'm perhaps using that as a tool to raise some critical questions.

TD: I really got that impression in what I imagine were some of the earliest performances, [ones] I saw you do years ago in which you had a different persona, Sir Raj III [. . .] and as I've learned a little bit more about photography in India in the 19th century [. . .] I learned that in, you know, after the rebellions in North India in 1875--

NC: 1857.

TD: Oh, I'm sorry, 1857 [. . .] many of the landholders and princes who were loyal to the East India Company and to Britain were rewarded with these photographs--

NC: Yes.

TD: In their regalia and it seems to me that there is some sort of connection there--

NC: Absolutely--

TD: [That character] also troubles a notion of a kind of "authentic" representation of India. Because you're already presenting a kind of representation of a person that's already mixed-up with colonialism [. . .] it's not like "here's an authentic, nationalist figure of India."

NC: Absolutely not [. . .] in fact I'm very critical of these ideas of perhaps post-colonial ideas of the nation, the state divided linguistically, racially [. . .] of course these are things that have been throughout history and wars have been fought through history it's so much of what we experience, even today is about territory and land and mine and yours.

But what particularly interested me with turn of the century photography, late nineteenth century photography--even Indian photography like Raja Deen Dayal, for example, was taking pictures of Indian dignitaries in all their full regalia and what was really interesting to me was these so-called nawabs and princes were signing their allegiance to the British crown across their photographs.

They almost looked like tiger heads, in a sense, trophies that perhaps these photographers took back to the Queen and said--or the King--and said: "Look what we've got. We've not just got India, but we've got these demi-gods under us and so now we are the supreme powers," you know, as far as taking ownership, or playing the part of owners and sahibs.

But what was really interesting about these princely figures in India was that they were puppets, they were wedged in between being rulers and subjects at the same time [. . .] their regalia and their titles almost seemed like a facade. They seemed like they wanted to play the part of occidental gentlemen, and they wanted to be the sahibs and they aspired to be that. They wore their medals like perhaps a British general would [. . .] where his medals. They stood in poses perhaps like knights would stand in poses [. . .] I was making relationships with perhaps [. . .] portraiture, you know, like even if I were to think about Velasquez, or you know, that very stoic, classical pose.

So all of this work, even the performance work, visually speaking, stems from this idea of early twentieth century photography--or late 19th century photography--where you have the studio, the studio backdrop, which is the painted studio backdrop. And the model, that sort of stands in front of this illusion of a landscape and so the idea of these performances come from that, from Sir Raja III, where the raja feels the need to make his landscape, to paint his own fantasy behind that. And where does he take that landscape and that fantasy? From the world around him.

So, the scale of these pictures come from this idea of them working, perhaps, as studio backdrops and posing in front of them. So a lot of the performances are slow and long in duration because

they really kind of take this pose and this kind of stillness into account.

Part II

TD: So, at the end of several of your previous performances you climb into this white gown whig and crown and I believe you ascend a kind of throne, right?

NC: Yes [. . .] When I'm thinking about it being a time-based artwork, for example, if I'm thinking about it as a live performance, with a start and a finish, I think I'm wanting to think about the finish as an opera would have, as a kind of crescendo, as a kind of crowning moment. Or if I were to think of the hero's journey, or kind of return with the elixir, or kind of crown yourself, you know, the sort of victor, you know, the knight has slayed the dragon kind of feeling. The mountain has been crossed.

So in this need to bring closure to the performance I was thinking about how I can do that. I mean, of course, I've already played [with] this idea of class [. . .] and I'm so aware in the sense of how divided we are in classes [in India]--and I'm very aware of what side of that I come from. I'm very aware of it--more now, because I now live in India. I've spent six years in the United States and coming back to India that awareness became very heightened.

And how I was brought up. If I was to think how I was brought up, it was in such a--in a very kind of colonial environment and home where we were taught table manners, we were, you know, taught how to speak English and speaking in English was very important. Knowing how to eat with a fork and knife was very important, you know, napkin on your lap, "please"s and "thank you"s in place--and where did that come from?

If I was to think about it, it's very post-1857. My great great--if I was to trace back on my genealogy and where my family comes from, I mean, if I were to think about my own history I can trace it back actually to the 1840s and 1850s and that's where the kind of narrative around the family starts with this journey that my great great grandfather takes from Alkavar in Punjab to the state of Jammu in Kashmir because he's recruited by the maharaja.

I'm digressing.

TD: No, it's a very interesting digression.

NC: So, I go back a lot to Victorian England and Victorian values. The role that men and women play in society; I'm very critical of it because I found it empowering and at the same time I found it stifling. I found it rich and at the same time I found it inaccessible, made myself inaccessible.

So [. . .] playing the part of this empress if not emperor--because that's the obvious kind of connection I would make to gender perhaps, being a man myself--I thought that if I would take this idea of gender and twist it and create an empress as opposed to an emperor I would put myself in this position that I feel that I am in [. . .] having a certain sense of power and empowerment but also being powerless because I'm corsetted and sort of constrained and tight into this dress and yet I'm claiming to be in the center of the universe because I've made this drawing from my vantage point.

TD: As a kind of act of mastery . . .

NC: Exactly. And if I am to say that this is the end of the performance, then I'm saying that I crown myself the empress of the moment. To say: "This is my homeland, this is my time, I'm here, I'm here now as you are."

In a way, it's a way to take a bow, it's a way to say a thanks, a way to kind of finish a portrait.

And the Queen Victoria character--well, she's not really a Queen Victoria character, but she's also Yog Raj Chitrakar, she's another avatar of Yog Raj Chitrakar--comes from being in Bombay as well. I mean, I had this, the performance that I did was in Colaba, which is a very very Victorian part of the city, you know, the architecture I was representing on the walls with this drawing that I was making was of Victorian Bombay, very British colonial architecture [. . .]

Hopefully there were layers [. . .] that one could peel though and read about what the symbol of this queen or empress could mean.

TD: So, I've been kind of suggesting what my reading has been as an observer, which leads me to ask about your expectations for an audience and who you think your [. . .] intended audience might be [. . .]

NC: It's a very tricky question, you know, and to walk into any work, any performative work [. . .] any work with an assumption of the audience is, I think, to me, the beginning of, perhaps, a disaster.

[Laughter]

NC: I don't want to assume the position of the audience because that then limits what I can do with the work because I'm preempting perhaps what the audience walks in with. And so I think the moment I start to do that, I start to find myself [. . .] digging myself into a bit of a hole. The moment I start to take away the audience from the picture and start to put all of the onus onto just myself and what my world and my language and just the things that surround me and perhaps the sum total if I can say of all my own experiences from the way in which I experience and perceive the world and my work as a result of that, then I feel very liberated.

So, would I do the same thing in Kashmir? Yes, I would do the exact same thing in Kashmir that I would do in New York. I would dress up in the same kind of very colonial garb and walk down the streets of Serenever as I would the streets of Brooklyn.

The way in which the work is experienced and what happens with the work is then determined by the audience, but I think it's detrimental to my work if I was to preempt that.

The audience has always made the work as much as I have. The audience's desire to see the work has made the work--

TD: And that desire was very much in evidence in this performance [in the New Museum]. You had a crowd that was able to interact with you in the space or from behind a glass wall, and I think most preferred to interact with you in the space or observe in the space and follow you from place to place within the space; so there was definitely a kind of cord of desire leading them from place to place as you moved through the space.

NC: It's interesting what this space did for this performance. You hit the nail on the head; I think the glass has put the audience in two very distinctly different positions, one of being outside of the glass and yet being able to see the glass and feeling invisible as an audience and then walking in the space and sort of becoming an active audience and saying: "Now I am visible too." So it's interesting what this particular space does for the performance.

TD: I was also interested in asking you--these performances have lasted for several days, you know, blocks of several hours [. . .] what is the kind of internal experience you have of going through one of these performances.

NC: You know, like a play, for example [. . .] when you are to do a play on stage as an actor, a three act play even, the longest that you could possibly have, and you're onstage [but] you can

walk in and out of your parts, you have your green room, you have the wings, and there are moments when you're onstage and you know, you're in front of a live audience, and you give it your all and then you walk out of stage and then, you know, you're yourself and so you can slip in and out [of character].

But by giving myself [. . .] by wedging in this kind of durational aspect into the work I give myself no escape from this idea of the character. And then what is that character and how blurry can those lines become between what is real and what is fantasy, what is dramatized and what is truly experienced? So when I wake up in the morning at six o'clock and I have not a single person around me except for myself am I still performing and I think: "Yes, I am, because I am fixing myself a cup of tea; if there were a hundred people around me, I would still be fixing myself this cup of tea.

TD: So for those days you usually sleep in the space?

NC: I do sleep in the space and I go through the motions of my daily activity perhaps in the space--not necessarily in that order, maybe. I don't really have an order in my daily life, with my daily activities, but I hate routines so--but oddly enough, within the performance [. . .] I find that I give myself a routine only because I want to hang on to something that is kind of--is, there is a certain kind of order within that that I want to give myself. So eating, sleeping, washing, drinking, sitting, standing--things I do every day I would do in the performance as well.

TD: I also wanted to ask you [. . .] a broader question about living in Mumbai [Bombay], you're engaged in the art world there, and it seems like [. . .] art from India is enjoying more attention in the last few years. Pooja Sood, writing in *Flash Art*, says that there are still significant obstacles for Indian artists working in newer mediums, that there is limited public funding available and that it isn't generally being directed towards new forms of art, that the art market offers support for work that lends itself [to] sale at auction but not necessarily for installation, performance, and video work--

NC: That's changing already. Pooja Sood is, of course, an incredible woman, part of an organization called Khoj International Art[ist's] Association. I had the esteemed opportunity of working with Pooja on a number of occasions, on three Khoj events, three Khoj programs.

They're a non-for-profit, artist-run organization in Delhi that is primarily concerned with promotion of young, upcoming--well, not just young, upcoming--but more kind of edgy, experimental, non-traditional, non-object-based art practices and art work, which is where I found my footing, I think, in many ways in India with performance as well because I was part of the performance art residency they organized in [. . .] 2007 [. . .]

Things have changed immensely in India. I think over the past two years, as I was telling you earlier, Thomas, you know I come back to New York after five years and I find that very little has changed, just in terms of the physicality and just in terms of visually, as a city. When I look at Bombay [Mumbai]--in five years it's changed three, four times over, including the art market.

When we came back to India in 2005, January, the art market, the art world was just getting about to explode and it did explode in 2006 and 2007. [These were] very big years for India. India got a lot of recognition, there was a lot of money in the market, a lot of credit money in the market, as we learned in 2008. Prices were soaring. Indian artists were really on the international scene with--selling works for exorbitant prices, artificially so, unnecessarily so.

A lot of us that were working in non-traditional, non-object--specifically [non-]object-oriented work--were very critical of the way in which things were working and a lot of galleries opened up in Bombay [Mumbai]; we were very critical of the way some of these galleries functioned.

The recession was actually a bit of a breath of fresh air for a lot of us. A lot of us that were working in mediums that were not specifically market-oriented found ourselves, in fact, coming in to a bit more into the forefront because the big players, certainly felt or were, fell a little bit to the wayside because their works were simply not going to be able to fetch the prices that they were demanding and it was the sort of emerging artists in my generation that found ourselves pushing forward a little bit.

What has also helped immensely over the past two years, three years, is the exhibitions that have happened in Japan with big Indian art exhibitions that have happened in Japan at the Mori Art Museum and at the Serpentine Gallery [in London].

TD: You participated in--

NC: I participated in those shows, yes. But I'm very critical of shows of that nature because [. . .] as immensely impressed as I am with someone like Hans Ulrich [Obrist] and his mind and his vision and his tenacity and his edge and the way in which he thinks about art and making and how connected he is with that, I am critical of shows that [. . .] want to, let's say, showcase "Indian art," for example, because it kind of goes back to that colonial question of exoticization and otherness.

So you don't actually integrate cultures when you do that; you exclude cultures when you do that. You tell us that India's actually a place that's far away as opposed to it being around the corner. In fact, you make larger divides, perhaps, then you make associations because then it becomes about it being from India as opposed to it being from art.

I think it's very important when I'm offered an opportunity like this, to accept these opportunities and to do with it--to precisely flip those questions and to ask those very harsh questions from within the belly of the beast.

TD: Well, Nikhil Chopra, thank you so much for taking time out to talk with us today.

NC: My pleasure, Thomas. My pleasure.